Connecticut Clockmaking

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Francis Donovan, Thomaston, Conn. (Dec. 13) CONNECTICUT CLOCKMAKING

Mr. Botsford is absorbed in a “History of Plymouth” which I loaned him on my last visit. As I enter, he looks up from the volume. “I thought you'd show up about now,” he says. “I was

just lookin' through the book. Lot of folks here I remember well. Old Man Sutliffe here, he built that house over on Marine St., first house on the street.

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“When we first moved up here that street wasn't nothin' but a cow track. You could look right across the meadow from here and see old Sutliffe's house. There used to be a spring up in back of there -- supplied all the houses in this section, summer of 1870. Had a big droughth that year. Driest period I ever knew. All the wells were dry but one or two and those that weren't dry were very low. Used to get water for the shop hands from that spring over there -- big buckets of it, they'd carry down to the shop. There was only one well left in Plymouth with water in it. That well furnished water for the whole town of Plymouth. Lots of folks here who had water in their wells wouldn't let nobody outside the families use ‘em. Note local history

“Here's Old Baldwin's picture. He came from over back of Plymouth -- what they used to call the Baldwin section. I remember him -- first time I ever saw him was when I was goin' to school. Old Baldwin was on the school committee. He came down one noon -- or four o'clock -- I forget when it was -- and he called all the children out of school. He had a big long ash stick -- 7 or 8 ft. long -- and a wooden box.

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He opened up the box, and out slid a rattlesnake -- first one I ever saw. He kept proddin' that thing around with the stick, explainin' about it and how he'd caught it, and all us kids was rooted there -- seared it would get away from him. But it didn't. When he was through, he just steered it back in the box as nice as you please.

“Here's Dorrence Atwater -- that's the man who kept the records in Andersonville prison and helped Clara Barton to find the graves of all the Union soldiers. Here's old Dr. Woodruff and Judge Bradstreet and Frank Etheridge. Some of them look just as natural

--” Mr. Botsford closes the book. “It's a real pleasure to look through that book again -- I haven't seen one of them in a long time.

“Now what was we talkin' about yesterday. Nationalities, for one thing. I told you how the English and the Irish came in here first, and then the Germans and then the Scotch and the Swedes and then the Russians and the Polacks. We never got many Italian families and only one or two Jews. There was some Polish Jews came here a number of years ago, worked in the shop. They was always lookin' for live poultry and such that they could kill accordin' to their beliefs -- kosher, or whatever you call it. [Used in Clockmaking Research?]

“The Scotch used to have some great times here. Had what they called a Caledonian society. Every summer they used to have picnics up to Ely's Grove -- some called it Caledonia. They used to have running and jumping and pole vaulting, and tossing the caber, and hammer throwing.

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Old Tom Kellie -- he was young Tom then -- he used to be best at pole vaulting. And old Bob Innes was the champion at tossing the caber. He was as strong as an ox. That [daber?] caber looks like a young telegraph pole. They grab it by one end and hoist it up in the air, then they run a few feet with it and give it a heave -- a very interestin' thing to watch.

“Then they always had a greased pig chase, and climbin' a greased pole. And they had what they called a sword dance -- and old, old custom, came down from the Scottish Highlands. They'd lay those two swords down, with the edges up, and dance in between ‘em. The idea was never to touch the edge. In the old days, they say, they did it with razor sharp swords, and if you touched one of them it was too bad.

“Had a Hibernian Society here, but they wasn't quite so active. They always went to Waterbury to parade on Saint Patricks Day. They'd usually have rainy weathers and

[they'd?] have to wade up to their ankles in mud. There wasn't any pavements in them days.

“I ever show you my library? Might find somethin' of interest.” Mr. Botsford leads the way into the front room. The “library” is a glass-enclosed bookcase -- half a dozen shelves crammed with books of assorted sizes and varied subject matters. There is a set of “The American Cyclopedia;” a number of Scott's Bibles; a huge volume entitled “The Living World,” containing illustrations and descriptions of every animal known to man, and which Mr. Botsford declares came as a premium with the purchase of a suit of clothes; a small volume of early American 4 poetry; a number of histories; a set of 100 “Famous Detective Stories,” a “Concordance,” which Mr. Botsford explains will give you the exact verses in the Bible in which to find desired quotes; and several other volumes.

“Here's something,” says Mr. Botsford, pulling out a thickish red covered book entitled “The American Indian;” “Now this was a favorite of mine when I was a kid.” He turns the pages, disclosing brightly colored prints of the famous indian chieftains -- Tecumseh, Joseph Brant, King Philip. Mr. Botsford points to Joseph Brant. “He was a white man -- the skunk -- masqueradin' as an Indian.” There is a vivid reproduction of Capt. John Smith's harrowing experience, which Mr. Botsford confesses was always one of his favorites. Shows Mr. Smith being rescued by Pocahontas. Most of these books have been published in the 1850's.

“Here's somethin' else,” Mr. Botsford reaches into the bookcase, brings forth a small box, from which he removes the cover. “Visitin' cards,” says he. “It used to be an old habit to swap these cards with your friends. Not leave ‘em when you called at someone's home, understand, just swap ‘em.” He takes the cards out, one by one, recalling old friends whose names are printed, or in some cases handwritten. “Papers used to be full of advertisements for these cards. Here's one should interest you. Used to be the custom to hand one of these to a girl when she was comin' out of church.”

The card bore this message: “Escort card, Fair Lady, will you allow me the pleasure of escorting you home? If so, keep this card, if not return it. Yours respectfully,” with a space for the gallant's signature. note

“Used to have lozenges, too,” says Mr. Botsford, “With some sentimental message printed on ‘em. You'd hand one to a girl you was sweet on. Another great thing was advertisin' cards. Did I mention them before? Kids used to collect ‘em and paste ‘em in big books, like scrap books. It was a great fad back in the seventies. Older people used to collect ‘em too. You go in any drug store, in them days, and the counters would be piled high with these big books. You got the cards from the merchants. Come on out in the woodshed and I'll show you some.”

We repair to the woodshed, where Mr. Botsford digs out two old books, turns the pages. “See what I mean?” The cards are an interesting sidelight on the vast changes in advertising methods coincident with the dawn of the motor age. Every conceivable subject was covered by them. They ran the gamut from the subline to the ridiculous, dwelt on matters political and matters amorous, touched such widely diversified subjects as religion and warfare -- advocated temperance and advertised liquor. In virtually no instance was the “sponsor's” product, or goods, prominently mentioned, and on some of them the merchant's name was in such small print as to almost escape attention.

“There's a good story about them advertising cards. You remember how old Mr. Lemmon, the druggist, used to stutter. When he first came to town here and went to work in the drug stores there was another fellow used to stutter just as bad, name was Fred Birch.

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“Birch went into the store one day, and he says, ‘G-g-g-g-imme, s-s-s-some advertisin' c-c-c-ards.’ Lemmon says, ‘You g-g-g-get the he-he-hel outa here.’ Thought he was mockin' him, you see.

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“All the merchants handled them cards. Sometimes they'd give you one or two, sometimes, if they was in a good humor, they'd give you a whole stack of ‘em.

“Cards came in cigarette packages later, the kids took to collectin' them. And some of them gave out printed flags of all countries. Idea was to get as many different flags as you could, and then the girls would make sofa pillows out of them.

“Times change. In the old days, there was so little to do, now it's all different. The kids now have a million things they can do.”